



*From “Wetland Program Development Grants (WPDGs) Case Studies”
Published October, 2006*

Santee Sioux Nation of Nebraska: *Establishing an interagency task force to provide guidance on the restoration and preservation of tribal wetlands*

Introduction

The Santee Sioux Nation is a federally recognized Tribe with Reservation lands encompassing approximately 184 square miles in northeast Nebraska. There are four major watersheds (Bazile, Howe, Lost and the Missouri River) located within the boundaries of the Reservation. Howe Creek is tributary to Bazile Creek, while Lost and Bazile Creeks empty into the Missouri River. The Tribe created the Office of Environmental Protection in 1990 to administer environmental activities for the protection of the health and welfare of Tribal and non-Tribal members, the environment and other Tribal resources within the exterior boundaries of the Santee Sioux Indian Reservation.

The Santee Sioux Tribal Wetlands Program was established in 1993 to “assess, conserve, enhance and restore the quantity, quality and biological diversity of wetlands” on the Reservation. Over the years, the Tribe has received multiple assistance agreements focused on wetland and riparian area management. The first project funded focused on developing a Tribal Wetlands Conservation Plan and an initial assessment of wetlands and riparian area resources. Another project developed a detailed assessment of the health of wetland and riparian areas by watershed. This grant categorized wetland and riparian areas, identified the most probable impacts to those resources and coordinated activities with the Santee Sioux Tribal Water Quality Program (SSTWQP). A subsequent project established riparian zone demonstration sites along Bazile and Howe creeks and created an interagency task force. Those efforts were followed by an evaluation of the Tribal Wetlands program to demonstrate progress in meeting the core elements of a wetlands program. Currently, the Tribe, through coordination with the SSTWQP, is developing a comprehensive wetland monitoring and assessment program along with establishing wetland water quality standards that include numerical and biological criteria.

WPDG Activity

While the Tribe acknowledges all activities conducted by the Wetlands Program as successful, perhaps two of its greatest accomplishments involved the establishment of an interagency task force, which initiated stream bank stabilization and wetlands restoration projects utilizing alternate funding sources. The task force was a coordinated effort involving members from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Nebraska Indian Community College, University of Arkansas, US Army Corps of Engineers, Lewis and Clark Natural Resources District, Natural Resources Conservation Service, US Department of Agriculture, Santee Sioux Pesticides Program and a local landowner. A specific goal of

this task force was to provide recommendations to the Santee Sioux Nation for the protection of wetland and riparian areas within the boundaries of the Reservation.

A demonstration streambank stabilization project was recommended to the Tribal Council as a method to reduce significant stream bank erosion along Bazile Creek that was causing loss and degradation of the riparian zone. The Tribe, a local landowner and the NRCS worked together to construct a cedar tree revetment along a segment of Bazile Creek. They established base-line elevation data, cut and transported cedar trees and prepared the site to set trees along the toe of the cut bank. Once the structure was installed, trees were planted in the upland area adjacent to the stream bank to reestablish a forested riparian buffer. The task force recommendations have led to a reduction of sediment load in Bazile Creek. Since installation, the local Landowner no longer farms to the edge of the stream bank and maintains the forested riparian buffer. As a result, sediment transport to the creek has been significantly reduced.

The interagency task force recommended a second demonstration project involving the restoration of approximately twenty acres of wetlands in the floodplain area of Bazile Creek. Through a coordinated effort involving many partners, including a cooperative agreement with NRCS/USDA and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Tribe converted unusable agricultural land into a wetlands area that enhanced floodplain habitat, resulting in benefits to migratory birds and other wildlife species native to the area. The identified area was ranked to determine its acceptance in the USDA Wetlands Reserve Program and a ten year contract was negotiated for the improvement of wildlife habitat and wetland quality. Demonstration projects undertaken in response to interagency task force recommendations have benefits beyond the restoration of wetland habitats, as some of these areas continue to facilitate outreach activities that increase knowledge about the benefits of protection and enhancement activities for wetland resources.

Current Work and Future Plans

The Santee Sioux Nation has ongoing efforts to develop a wetlands monitoring and assessment program and wetland water quality standards specific to tribal wetlands. Future activities include identifying possible renovation sites to increase wetland areas on the Reservation, maintaining wetland monitoring activities and continuing partnerships with local, state and federal partners to ensure that the Tribe's wetland resources are effectively protected.

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